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ENGLISH FURNITURE STYLES

BY WALTER A. DYER

Author of "The Lure of the Antique," "Early American Craftsmen," "Creators of English Style," Etc.

Photographs by Courtesy of Metropolitan Museum of Art

I. JACOBAN AND RESTORATION

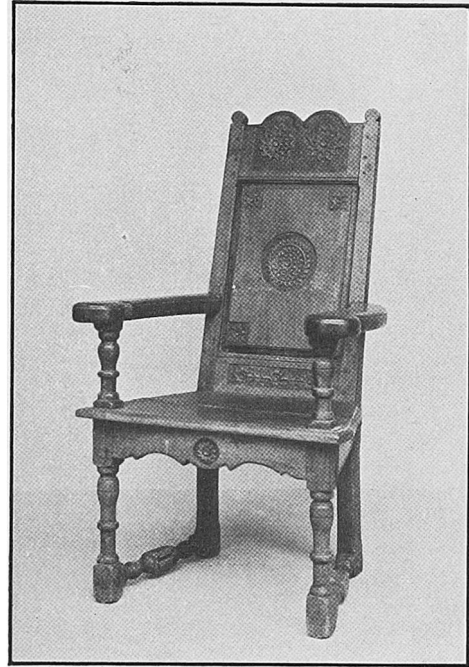
IN scanning my library of books on old furniture, some of them huge volumes, I have often wondered why some one did not publish a small volume of ready reference on this subject. It would be necessary, of course, to omit many interesting and important details, and the average author is loath to do this. But a concise, abbreviated survey of the subject would often be most helpful, particularly for those who have not the time or the inclination to study the large books.

I have accordingly attempted such a brief survey in the belief that others may have felt a similar need. I shall try to cover the entire subject of English furniture design from 1550 to 1800 in three short papers, which means little more than a working outline. I shall divide the subject into the periods of the Jacobean and the Restoration, the Anglo-Dutch period of William and Mary and Queen Anne, and the Georgian period.

First, to summarize the dates: The Norman and Gothic periods covered, roughly, the years 1066 to 1485. The Tudor period included the reigns of Henry VII (1485-1509), Henry VIII, contemporary with the Renaissance movement (1509-1547), Edward VI (1547-1553), Mary (1553-1558), and Elizabeth (1558-1603). This last half century is sometimes referred to as the Elizabethan period. The term Jacobean or Stuart is often given to the entire period from 1603 to 1689, but a distinct change in styles took place in the middle of it, and it is much more logical to divide it into two periods. The Jacobean period proper included the reigns of James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649). There intervened the Commonwealth or so-called Cromwellian period (1653-1659) followed by the period of the Restoration, including the reigns of Charles II (1660-1685) and James II (1685-1689). After that came William and Mary and the period to be discussed in the next paper.

Up to the close of the Cromwellian period oak was the predominant wood in English furniture. The earliest furniture was crude and heavy and included only such articles as were essential to domestic life — chests, tables, benches, beds and, occasionally, chairs.

Emerging from the crudities and limitations of the Gothic period, English furniture yet retained the Gothic traditions of sturdiness and virility for many years, until



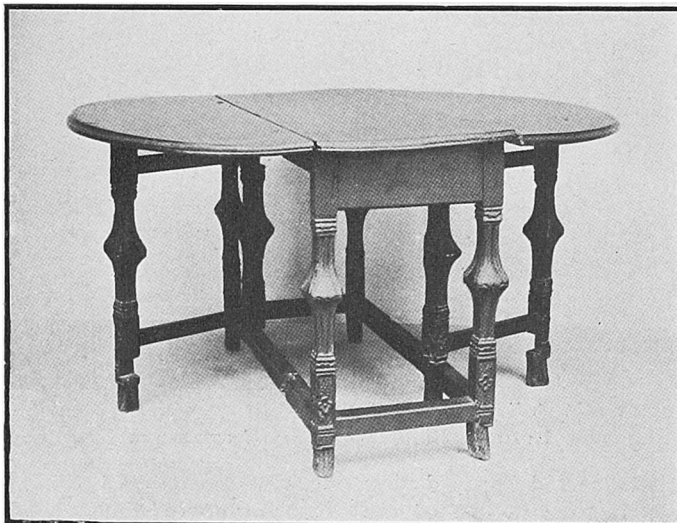
OAK WAINSCOT CHAIR OF ABOUT 1650

the Continental influences, which at first refined it, led it at length into the extravagance of the French rococo. During the period under discussion, we have the native sturdiness of the Jacobean oak followed by the more ornate and graceful forms of the Restoration.

The early Renaissance or early Tudor period (1509-1558) shows a mixture of Gothic survivals with Italian, Flemish and French importations. The typical design details I am obliged to pass over.

During the prosperous reign of Elizabeth, English

furniture took on a more distinctive character. Among the decorative details introduced during this period were heraldic motifs in the carving, the diamond or lozenge on the backs of the chairs and the panels of chests and cupboards, fruit and foliage designs, and the melon or bulb on table legs and cupboard pillars. The linen-fold motif of Henry VIII gave place generally to scroll and strap-work. Turned work also became somewhat popular. Chairs were not



AN OAK GATE-LEG TABLE WITH CARVED LEGS AND SUPPORTS. ABOUT 1685. THE LEGS WERE MORE COMMONLY TURNED

common, but there were some curule-shaped chairs of Italian design, wooden-seated armchairs with much turned work, and heavy, straight-backed carved wainscot chairs. The Tudor board-and-trestle table was followed in Elizabeth's time by a longer, narrower, more ornate style, with four heavy legs of an exaggerated baluster form, often with a bulbous carving half way down. The legs were joined by heavy rails or struts near the floor.

The furniture of the period of James I was that of a transition stage, Elizabethan features generally predominating. The true Jacobean style reached its height during the reign of Charles I.

The general form of the furniture remained severely rectangular. The legs of tables and chairs were perpendicular, the chair backs straight and the seats flat. Such articles as stood on legs were heavily underbraced.

It was in the decorative carving that Jacobean furniture excelled. The typical designs include, first of all, the running pattern of figure eights and contiguous circles. Other hall-marks of the period are the semi-circle filled with petals, geometric and lozenge paneling, the rounded arch, and more or less elaborate double scrolls. More and more intricate strap-work was introduced, and a spiral form is frequently to be found in chair legs and on cupboards and chests of drawers.

Chairs were still uncommon, but appeared in greater variety. The wainscot chair persisted, but became gradually lighter in form, with the backs sometimes pierced. There were also various forms of turned chairs, with three or four legs. During the reign of Charles I a French chair was introduced, a much lighter form, with turned legs and with the back and seat covered with leather or embroidery. The use of stools and forms continued. Toward the close of the period couches and day beds were introduced.

The typical table of the period was of oak, similar to the Elizabethan, with bulb-turned legs giving place later to



SMALL TABLE, LATE JACOBEOAN, OF OAK AND WALNUT, SHOWING THE POPULAR SPIRAL TURNING

simpler baluster forms, and often with rails carved in arabesque or lunette patterns. Occasionally smaller tables were made with a single leaf and a swinging leg to support it—the forerunner of the gate-leg table.

Chests and cupboards, often richly carved, were common. The cupboard, indeed, was one of the most interesting products of the period. One form, called the press cupboard, was closed in front; another, the court cupboard, was open below, being merely an elevated chest resting on spiral, turned or carved supports.

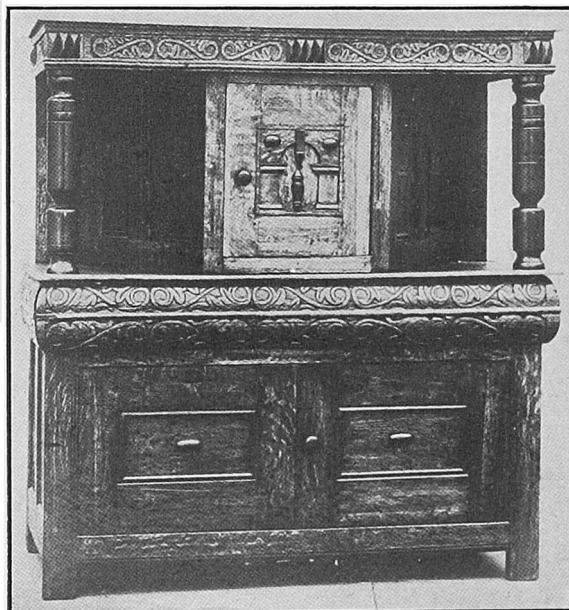
These were the outstanding features of the furniture of the Jacobean period. The so-called Cromwellian period was characterized merely by an added stiffness and severity among the Puritans and by very little of artistic significance. The Cromwellian chair was a descendant of the wainscot, with a half back of padded leather in place of the solid panel, and usually a seat of the same material fastened with brass-headed nails. Legs, stiles and stretchers were of turned oak. Toward the end of the Commonwealth walnut began to come into vogue, and a tendency toward greater lightness. Spiral or

simply turned legs and the use of cane seats and backs began to appear in chairs. Chests became less popular, giving place to cupboards with drawers or chests of drawers.

With the restoration of Charles II to the throne of England in 1660 there came greater luxury and comfort into the better English homes. The King brought with him from the Continent the spirit of the late Flemish Renaissance and the French styles of Louis XIV. Imported Dutch and Flemish workmen introduced a more elaborate scroll-work, pierced carving and inlay of ebony, ivory and mother-of-pearl. The



ROUNDABOUT CHAIR OF THE LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY, WITH RUSH BOTTOM AND WITH THE SPANISH FOOT IN FRONT



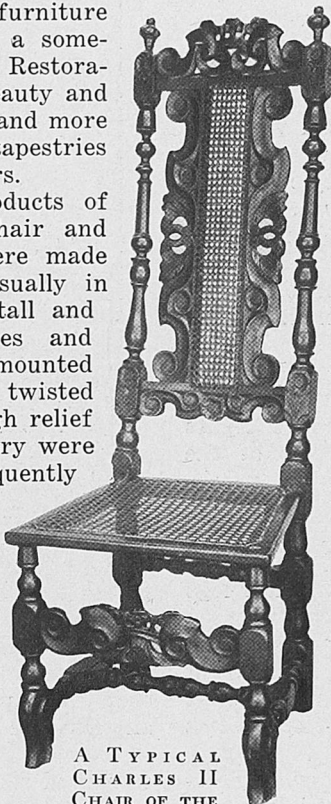
TYPICAL JACOBEOAN PRESS CUPBOARD OF OAK. 1650-1675

tulip and other design motifs appeared in the carving.

Oaken furniture of a late Jacobean type continued to be made to some extent, but gradually the lighter forms and the use of walnut superseded it. The architectural note in furniture almost entirely disappeared. It was a somewhat mixed, exotic style, that of the Restoration period, but one not lacking in beauty and distinction. Marquetry became more and more popular, and the use of expensive tapestries and embroideries for upholstered chairs.

Perhaps the most noteworthy products of this period were the Charles II chair and the gate-leg table. These chairs were made in oak and maple sometimes, but usually in walnut or beech. The backs were tall and narrow, with carved cresting, sides and underbraces. They were often surmounted by a Tudor rose or a crown. Slender, twisted columns and rich scrolls carved in high relief became a feature. Cane and upholstery were used for backs and seats, the backs frequently consisting of narrow cane panels within an elaborately carved frame.

These chairs were of two general types—Flemish and Spanish. In the Flemish type the back consisted of turned stiles within which was a cane panel bordered by scroll-work carving. The legs were usually S-shaped, with scroll feet and a broad scroll-work underbrace in front. In the Spanish type the legs were turned and the backs were of solid cane or tooled leather. The feet were square and flaring—the typical Spanish foot. Toward the end of the period the



A TYPICAL
CHARLES II
CHAIR OF THE
FLEMISH TYPE, WITH
SCROLL-WORK CARVING,
CANE SEAT AND BACK,
AND THE FLEMISH FOOT.

day-bed or cane sofa became fashionable, with ornamental details closely following those of the chairs.

Long oak dining-tables, showing more refinement than formerly in the turning of legs and struts, and with carved aprons, belong to this period, but these gave place to tables with two swinging leaves. The most noteworthy table of this type, and the most interesting introduction of the period, was the gate-leg table, made usually in oak or walnut. It was usually round, though sometimes oval or rectangular, with sometimes a border carved around the top in low relief. It had turned underbraces and supports and six or more turned legs, two or four of which could be opened like gates to support the drop leaves.

Another noteworthy product is found in the beautiful cupboards, cabinets, chests of drawers and clock cases of the period, usually of walnut and inlaid in elaborate and intricate patterns. The beds, however, were still heavy four-posters, with clumsy testers and stuffy hangings.

Walnut was found to be a much better medium than oak for work of this kind, and by the time of James II's reign it had practically driven out the coarser-grained wood as the fashionable material.

The period of the Restoration, therefore, was marked by a distinct change in furniture styles, with greater luxury, grace and ornateness. A new period of Anglo-Dutch furniture will be discussed in the next paper.

THE COLONIAL CHURCHES OF AMERICA

BY JAMES CHURCH ALVORD

AMERICA has given to the world just two types of architecture—the Mission buildings of California and the Colonial style of the Revolutionary era. The houses of this latter are recognized everywhere as delightful, even the smallest details of them are hunted up, preserved, copied, forged; our modern world has decreed them things of beauty and is preparing to enjoy them forever. But America has not yet discovered the Colonial meeting-house. In most cities it is extinct. Worcester, Massachusetts, for example, owned one in every Orthodox parish—the city is multitudinously Orthodox—thirty years ago; but to-day each has been replaced by a hideous pseudo-Gothic creation, brick veneered over with stone generally. Monstrosities they are, with square-topped windows, Norman ornamentations, iron towers. Yet Worcester is but a sample. In the environs of "artistic and cultured Boston" committees are planning new vandalisms, the tearing down of antique and lovely shrines, the erection of fresh horrors of mongrel architecture. One by one, as fire eats up the venerable fanes, the stone creations of Europe are aped in wood to replace them. Where the church is too primitive and plain, instead of decorating it,

developing it along the historic lines, it is torn down. As the Huguenots smashed the exquisite medieval cathedrals of Northern France for piety; so the sons of the Puritans are selling the dreams of their ancestors for lumber. Yet the Colonial church is the indigenous growth of American religion and is fitted for the streets of our towns and cities as none other can be.

The Colonial Church is the evolution of the classical forms of the English Renaissance, modified by local conditions and characterized by more refinement in proportion and detail. The change grew from one condition—the American architect built of wood. He recognized from the outset both the advantages and limitations of his material, accepted the door and window with a flat lintel, threw definitely away all round-tops and pointed arches, save for a fan-window here and there, confessing that the arch is a shape for stone. Having accepted this—a limitation perhaps—he lightened his church everywhere to correspond with his material, thus gaining an elegance of which England was ignorant. He then went swiftly on to perfect the steeple, that glory of America. He built it into a living flame. The tower of the Old Church